MAKE ME A STONE: THE FEMALE CHRIST FIGURE IN SCIENCE FICTION FILM

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The Female Christ Figure in Science Fiction Film

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Introduction

"Make them stop. They're everywhere. Every city, every...Every house, every room, they're all inside me. I can hear them all, and they're saying nothing! Get up. Please get up. 仁慈的上帝, 請帶我走・仁慈的上帝, 请带我走 (Merciful God, please take me away)...Please, God, make me a stone." –River Tam, Serenity

Upon arriving at a planet where thousands have been killed due to an ill-conceived government experiment, an overwhelmed River Tam, the Christ-figure in the science fiction film *Serenity* (2005), falls to her knees while saying this prayer. As in much of the film, River is overwhelmed by the sins of humanity, both those committed against her through government testing as well as sins done to others. Coded throughout the film as a Christ-figure, her cry to God is essentially asking Him to "let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39). But He does not answer. River is not transformed into a stone and is left overwhelmed by her emotions for the majority of the film.

River, a character in the film *Serenity* and the television series *Firefly*, is a Christ-figure created by the sinful actions of men whose hubris has led them to believe they can make a better breed of people. In this way, River can be categorized under Anton Karl Kozlovic's definition of the "redeemer." In Kozlovic's analysis of cinematic Christ-figures, redeemer Christ-figures "emerge from a context of evil or strife to take on the sinfulness of those around them, usually through their own suffering or death" (para 28). And as we see in the film, no one suffers like River. Mentally and physically manipulated by the government, River is designed to be the perfect government weapon. But this attempt to control River drives her to insanity and leaves viewers with a Christ-figure who lacks agency over self and circumstance, is powerless in all the ways that matter, and is reliant on male guardians to shuffle her from one scene to the next.

In another science-fiction film, *The Fifth Element* (1997), Leeloo is under the same Messianic stress. Leeloo, played by Milla Jovavich, is a "perfect being" whose physical body saves humanity from total annihilation – but only after she receives love from her male guardian and primary caretaker, Dallas Corbin. By the last scene of the film, when Leeloo must finally live up to her messianic role, she becomes too emotionally distressed by humanity's wickedness to perform, requiring Corbin to show her that there is something redeemable in the universe after all: heterosexual love. Only then does her body mystically release itself and save the galaxy.

As films like *The Fifth Element* and *Serenity* demonstrate, when female protagonists in science fiction films are portrayed as something more than simple heroines – as seemingly powerful saviors or Christ-figures – their role becomes regressive, reinforcing more conservative gender norms. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century U.S. and European films such as *The Fifth Element*, *Serenity*, *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007), *Babylon A.D.* (2008), *Children of Men* (2006) and *Minority Report* (2002) include female saviors and Christ-figures who lack agency over their role and therefore lack control over themselves as well as the circumstances involving them.

In this paper, I will argue that female saviors and Christ-figures lack agency, not only over events throughout the film, but over their own bodies. These women are consistently reduced to nothing more than vessels to be controlled by male guardians. Without agency and stripped of their ability to choose their own messianic path, female Christ-figures and saviors are ultimately disempowered and their roles undermined.

This disempowerment stands in striking contrast to male Christ-figures such as Anakin in *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005), Neo in *The Matrix* (1999), Kal-El in *Superman Returns* (2006) and Riddick in *The Chronicles of Riddick*

(2004). Male Christ-figures are defined by their ability to control events as well as their freedom to exercise mastery over their own bodies. Furthermore, they are defined by their ability to choose.

The female Christ-figure's inability to exercise agency within the science fiction genre is an unexpected phenomenon. Science fiction films incorporating a female Christ-figure might be a potential site of cultural intervention, but instead, it appears to reinforce traditional gender norms. This proves surprising for a few reasons. First, the genre has allowed for vibrant female action stars in recent years, often aiding in disrupting gender and cultural norms and allowing viewers to re-evaluate how they understand the relationship between women and power; therefore, one might expect more from the genre when it comes to its depiction of female Christ-figures. In addition, viewers presume saviors and Christ figures, no matter their gender, to be figures of power, making the lack of empowerment among female Christ-figures in science fiction perplexing. One would assume that female messiahs would be all-powerful and that there would be visible signs of that power; however, this is not the case. Instead, these women are often vessels used by men to save humanity, which results in their mental and emotional suffering.

Some film theorists have suggested female suffering in film is a form of empowerment. Linda Williams, in her study of the melodrama genre, makes this claim, arguing that the "victim hero's" suffering establishes her virtue and provides the moral authority to act. While Williams' contribution may be usefully applied to other films and genres, it does not appear relevant to the suffering experienced by female Christ-figures in science fiction films. This is primarily due to her claim that women suffer, in part, to atone for past sins (however, the female Christ-figure in science fiction is often elevated as perfect and sinless). As a result, female Christ-

figures in science fiction are not empowered through suffering, and their suffering is only a manifestation of their lack of agency.

Female Christ-figures in the genre are stripped of their power and agency in large part due to what Laura Mulvey describes as the male gaze. This gaze sexualizes and disempowers the Christ-figure, as their capacity to save is derived from their physical bodies, not their ability to actively make choices that result in humanity's deliverance. Furthermore, a female Christ-figure's lack of agency over her body and events results in her role being regressive in terms of gender.

Science Fiction and Matters of Faith

Science fiction has become increasingly intertwined with spirituality, perhaps speaking to our culture's interest in matters of faith. Science fiction film, television and literature are sensitive to cultural trends and have often been used as a way to explore and give voice to society's anxieties and hopes. J.P Telotte, author of *Science Fiction Film*, makes note of the genre's capacity to explore our collective psyche, recognizing that "science fiction, whether in film or the mainstream literature of the genre, could prove an important vehicle for articulating cultural anxieties and for commenting in a serious way on those concerns" (96). As Telotte further explains, science fiction has this ability because its departure from reality provides a safe space for social commentary. In this sense, science fiction allows our culture to work out sensitive issues, fears and concerns, including those pertaining to spirituality. Science fiction allows us to re-envision important matters from a distance and perhaps understand them in a new way.[1]

[1] This was the case during the Cold War. For example, Telotte cites Peter Biskind who explains that many science fiction films of the 1950's emphasized "a need for watchfulness," as in the case of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

This re-envisioning includes matters of science and spiritual faith. The genre has always been invested in the tension between technology and the divine. Shows such as *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999) dealt heavily with matters of faith, incorporating Bajoran priests and spiritually-driven characters as main players in its continuing storyline. The federation commander in the series was also the "Emissary," a Bajoran spiritual icon, and his attempt to balance these two warring roles creatively articulated the complex negotiation between science and spirituality. More recently, writer and director Joss Whedon's television cult hit, *Firefly* (2002-2003), engaged with faith by including a priest as one of the main characters. And the critically acclaimed *Battlestar Galactica (*2004-2009) had a narrative largely driven by religious prophecy, gods, questions of origins and mysticism.

As many directors, writers and producers have discovered, science-fiction television and films provide an ideal avenue to explore and develop protagonists as Christ-figures. While more mainstream genres, such as drama, are bound by realism, science fiction may investigate the more mystical side of the Christ-figure: prophecies, miracles in the form of supernatural powers, death and resurrections. In this way, science fiction can more fully study the divine or numinous characteristics of a Christ-figure. Thanks to apocalyptic settings and dystopian futures, the genre allows for larger-than-life scenarios that highlight the Christ-figure's power. After all, when the complete annihilation of humanity hangs in the balance, a Christ-figure will likely perform some fairly awesome acts to save the world from destruction. These acts code the Christ-figure as much more than a typical hero. From the beginning of the film, genre conventions indicate that through their unique powers or authority, Christ-figures will actively choose to restore order to disorder, prevent an apocalypse, depose an immoral system or save humanity from annihilation.

While the parameters of what constitute a Christ-figure in film are still being debated, the effort to form consensus has led to further distinguishing the Christ-figure from other popular archetypes. Kozlovic's master list of twenty-five characteristics common among Christ-figures is a tool many have utilized in their own research. But Kozlovic himself appreciates that additional definition is needed, and he has encouraged others to aid in the effort. Responding to Kozlovic's challenge, David Fillingim organizes Kozlovic's twenty-five characteristics into three more manageable categories: narrative parallels, which link the Christ-figure to the story and narrative of Christ;[2] ontological markers, which align the Christ-figure with special powers, assign him godlike status and address Christ's negotiation between his divine and human natures;[3] and cinematographic clues that use symbolism and recognizable Christic images to connect the Christ-figure to the person and story of Jesus.[4]

Though these characteristics assist in identifying Christ-figures in film, the Christ-figure's willing self-sacrifice and exercise of free will are particularly significant. A Christ-figure's degree of agency essentially determines the extent of his or her power. This mirrors the Christian reading of Jesus in the Gospels, as it is Christ's active choice to fulfill his messianic role that awards his death such profound meaning. Therefore, Christ's story is one which emphasizes his autonomy and ability to choose his fate, and as a result, the fate of others. He is tempted by Satan in the desert, but chooses to "deny the flesh." In the Garden of Gethsemane, it is understood that Christ willingly allows himself

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[2] These tend to be the most recognizable moments in Christ's ministry: gathering devoted followers, the presence of a Judas figure, the last supper, the sacrament of baptism, a death and resurrection and sacrifice. For example, River in *Serenity* experiences a figurative death, resurrection and ascension. And her counterpart, Jayne, serves as a Judas figure.

[3] Neo in the *Matrix*, Kal-El in *Superman*, Leeloo in *The Fifth Element*: these Christ figures, male and female, are "outsiders" on a prophetic mission to save the world from destruction and evil. [Leeloo speaks an unworldly language, does not know humanity's customs or history – nor does she know or understand their sinful nature. Throughout the film, she must negotiate her emerging role as woman and lover with that of preordained savior and outsider.]

[4] For example, Leeloo takes a cruciform pose as she saves the world at the end of the film.

to be taken by the Roman guard. This theme of denial and choice is the driving force behind all of Christ's actions and ministry. For that reason, the cinematic Christ-figure's willing self-sacrifice and agency over his or her role often is, and should be, a major theme in the film. The importance of Christ's agency and sacrifice is recognized by Linda Mercadante, who notes that "willing self-sacrifice has clearly been a dominant motif in Christian understandings of Jesus' life and work" (para 12). Kozlovic similarly finds this criterion important enough to include it in his inventory, making special note of the power of choice. He states, "Having assumed the mantle of Christhood, Christ-figures are frequently empowered to choose sacrifice out of their newfound knowledge, status, position, mission requirements, etc" (para 51). He goes on to note that part of this sacrifice often, though not always, leads to the Christ-figure's death because "dying is the *best* thing they can do, and they really *want* to do it" (ibid). Because sacrifice and free will are such crucial elements of the Christic story, one must ask if a Christ-figure can truly be empowered if he or she lacks agency throughout a majority of the film. One could conceivable have all the trappings of a Christ-figure, but without agency, the character would lack a crucial characteristic of a classic Christ or Jesus figure. While this does not necessarily prevent one from being a Christ-figure, it does appear to greatly disempower one's role.

We see this theme of choice and sacrifice in numerous science fiction films that incorporate a male Christ-figure. However, this pattern breaks down when the Christ-figure happens to be female. Suddenly, the importance of willful sacrifice and agency becomes non-existent – or ambiguous at best. The manner in which female Christ-figures in science fiction are depicted is unique, something that becomes clear when one examines how male Christ-figures are portrayed in the same genre.

Male Christ-figures in science-fiction cinema, unlike their female counterparts, are strongly linked with this narrative of free choice and willing self-sacrifice, partly due to how society defines the masculine. Brian Ott and Eric Aoki note that "masculinity" is more readily aligned with agency (156), which supports the idea that strong male leads are expected to exemplify established gender norms emphasizing male dominance. Therefore, male leads are to be active. We see this masculinity represented in male Christ-figures in science fiction films who are awarded a great deal of agency over their messianic mission as well as control over their own bodies, making these concepts of dominance and choice more prevalent. *The Matrix* series, for example, strongly demonstrates this topic of agency. From the very beginning of the film, Neo as Christ-figure is given the choice to take the blue or red pill, one allowing him to wake up from his false reality, the other to return to it. Whether deciding which pill to take, which door to open or who to save, Neo's story becomes one based largely on his power to choose his fate and control the fate of others.[5] This issue of choice is accentuated by the film's depiction of "the matrix" – a world where humans are given no choice at all. As a result, the primary premise of the series is that salvation can only be achieved by a savior empowered by choice, and this theme, manifested in Neo, reinforces traditional gender norms and concepts of masculinity and agency. Similar to *The Matrix*, agency is a driving plotline for other male-dominated messianic science fiction films including *The Chronicles of Riddick,* the *Star Wars* series and *Superman Returns*.

It is also worth noting that women Christ-figures in other genres are aligned with agency, accentuating the progress feminism has made in disrupting gender norms within many genre films, if not this particular niche of science fiction. There are female Christ-figures outside science fiction who are strong leaders and exercise

[5] What makes Neo unique is that his choices differ from the previous "systemic anomalies" or Christ-figures who came before him, of which there were six.

agency and sacrifice for the greater good. An empowered female Christ-figure in the drama genre includes Pai in *Whale Rider* (2002). In this film, Pai, a pre-teen Maori girl, is what Fillingim terms a polymythic Christ-figure, a Christ-figure who also shares commonalities with the spiritual legends and myths of other religions and cultures. But, as Fillingim argues, Pai's polymythic identity does not diminish her Christic attributes. The opening of the film suggests that Pai is the prophesized leader her people have been awaiting. Fillingim states that "Pai's gender also confers upon her the outsider status that Kozlovic names as one of the possible markers of Christ-figure identification" (para 8). Furthermore, this outsider status prompts Pai to assert herself and advance her own agenda throughout the film.[6]

Pai demonstrates her initiative and readiness to defend her vision even while it leads to conflict. She is a natural leader, which is evident in her willingness to question the patriarchy in her community, a community led by her grandfather, who is attempting to restore tradition – and gender norms – to his fractured people.[7] Through this struggle, Pai proves to be a progressive female Christ-figure who actively chooses and seeks out her role as savior while willingly sacrificing her life for her people. When a whale appears to take her away forever at sea, she says, "I was not afraid to die" (*Whale Rider*).[8] No matter the cost, Pai does what she feels she must, much like other male Christ-figures in the science fiction genre.

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[6] Fillingim outlines narrative markers such as an emersion baptism, death and resurrection. Pai's special ability to telepathically communicate with nature (the whales) is an example of an ontological indicator.

[7] This theme is most evident when Pai's grandfather re-establishes a traditional Maori school, open only to boys, in an effort to identify the leader and savior of his people. Pai is banned from attending training and is forced to learn the ways of a chieftain without her grandfather's permission. Pai's disruption of gender norms is a central theme in the film, and her respectful defiance of her grandfather continually showcases her agency.

[8] Pai's Christic connection is made most evident towards the end of the film when she willingly sacrifices herself for the good of her people. She rides a whale out to sea to save the group of beached whales that she has "called" through prayer. Pai's grandfather comes to recognize her identity as savior when he believes her to be drowned at sea. This "death" is met by a "resurrection" in the sense that Pai

Christ-figures, both male and female in various genres, show this degree of agency, the primary exception being female Christ-figures in science fiction films. More often than not, female Christ-figures in the genre lack the level of agency awarded to their male science fiction counterparts and female Christ-figures in other genres.

Again, this is surprising, especially when female science fiction Christ-figures perform stunning action sequences, which on the surface appear to empower them. One would expect female Christ-figures in science fiction, often described as deadly weapons and perfect beings, to reinforce feminist values in that action is often aligned with control and authority. It is also true that science fiction has generally made great strides on the part of women in cinema. As Telotte notes in his discussion of gender constructions in science fiction film, while the genre has traditionally been considered a male dominated sphere, where men act and women watch, science fiction films of the late twentieth century and onward have offered viewers more progressive female protagonists. Telotte argues that films, such as *Alien* (1979), "have pointedly situated women in positions of technological mastery – as wielders of hardware, as creators (technological mothers) of key programs, as the order givers in a technical culture – the full range of contemporary science fiction films have become texts for reconsidering the larger, masculinist emphasis of the genre and for suggesting how other genres might similarly be read or even reconceived along feminist lines" (49). Thanks to the genre's ability to enter into the realm of imaginative possibilities, since the 1980's, many science fiction films that also incorporate elements from the action genre have demonstrated a rather progressive portrayal of women, including Sarah Conner in *Terminator 2* (1991) and even more recently, Rebecca in *Tank Girl* (1995),

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somehow survives and is returned to shore. These series of events propelled by Pai's actions ultimately save her community.

Agent Scully in *The X-Files* (1998), Padme Amidalla in *Star Wars: Episode 1* (1999), Trinity in *The Matrix* series (1999, 2003), Laura Croft in *Laura Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (2003), Violet in *Ultraviolet* (2006) and Neytiri in *Avatar* (2009). In fact, in the many cases where the science fiction and action genres overlap – in essence creating a subgenre that features sci-fi female protagonists who double as action stars – active science-fiction heroines have provided alternatives to conventional gender interpretations.

However, even when female Christ-figures in the science-fiction genre are armed with a gun and given their share of action stunts, one will often find a puppet master pulling her strings. These women frequently lack agency over their role as well as ownership over their own bodies because their movements are controlled by male guardians or caretakers. This control exercised by a repressive, male-dominated state reduces the female Christ-figure to little more than a bodily vessel or tool used by men to save the world. The resulting frustration and disempowerment leads female Christ-figures to suffer greatly. Furthermore, this suffering proves to further disempower them.

The Sufferer

In the case of Leeloo in *The Fifth Element* and River in *Serenity*, among others, their lack of agency leads to physical and mental suffering. While suffering women are not new to film, exploring the manner of the female Christ-figure's unique mode of suffering is useful in identifying the presumed power associated with female Christ-figures. Some critics, such as Linda Williams, have argued that the very act of suffering is a form of empowerment in the sense that the victim-hero's suffering signifies their virtue and awards them moral legitimacy. Furthermore, Williams suggests that the empowerment that comes from moral legitimacy and recognition of the victim-hero's

existing virtue can "give moral authority to action" (*The Race Card*, 32).[9] Suffering leading to moral power and the authority to act is a concept shared by Lauren Berlant, a feminist critic who explains that in modern American political culture, the right to citizenship and "personhood" is often not determined based on law, but the degree one suffers. Explaining Berlant's theory, Williams notes the following:

> In the liberal, Constitutional model of citizenship, a citizen's value is secured through the notion of an abstract personhood protected equally under the law. But since this juridical notion of abstract personhood often fails to provide equal protection to all citizens, a second model of citizenship has emerged around the visible emotions of suffering bodies that, in the very activity of suffering, demonstrate their worth as citizens. (*The Race Card,* 23)

In this way, those who suffer are empowered by moral authority, and their pain elicits the sympathy of others, bestowing on the sufferer the mandate to act or have others act on their behalf, including the audience. This corresponds well to melodrama, a genre that has long been snubbed for being overly sentimental and feminine, but has also motivated political and social change through its complex negotiation of emotions between camera and spectator. Those watching characters suffer on screen attribute moral legitimacy to them because the "victim-hero of melodrama gains an empathy that is equated with moral virtue" (Williams, "Melodrama Revised" 66). Because many film genres also incorporate melodramatic elements, it is worth exploring how Williams' theory applies to films outside melodrama.

While melodramatic elements are present in some films discussed here, Williams' theory concerning suffering leading to empowerment does not aptly relate to the female

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[9] Williams discusses the nature of women and minorities suffering in melodrama, noting in her essay "Melodrama Revised" that these two groups "traditionally suffer the most and act the least" in the genre (60).

Christ-figure in science fiction for a few reasons. First, there is a key discrepancy between female protagonists in melodrama and female Christ-figures in science fiction. Though many female characters in the melodramatic mode suffer, part of that suffering is to purge them of their sinfulness or as a means of self-purification (Williams, *The Race Card,* 30). This is not the case with female Christ-figures who are already coded as perfect innocents. Instead, from the start, their suffering does not cleanse them of sin, but is representative of the sins committed by others. Furthermore, while the virtue of the female Christ-figure is displayed through suffering, their moral legitimacy is never in question – by the characters in the film or the audience. Therefore, while melodrama is in pursuit of moral legibility, female Christ-figures in science fiction films are already understood to be moral. Nonetheless, they are still made to suffer, which proves disempowering and redundant.

Williams also relies heavily on Berlant's argument, which is mainly political and focuses on the disenfranchisement of those not equally protected by law. Yet most of the films discussed here are preoccupied with the nature of divinity and are not driven by a message meant to inspire the audience into political action, which affects how suffering is portrayed and to what end.

As Williams explains, melodrama uses pathos to inspire action – action on the part of the audience, of characters in the film acting on behalf of the sufferer, and action carried out by the sufferer herself. But in many science fiction films incorporating a female Christ-figure, the action that takes place on behalf of the Christ-figure is devalued. Her suffering does not inspire the type of action that empowers her because the male guardians are often the ones who act, and their motives typically prove to be self-

serving.[10] In many cases, male guardians are not truly inspired to act because of the suffering Christ-figure, but instead act on their own behalf as a means of self-preservation or to rectify what they see as a personal injustice. This is particularly true in *Minority Report, The Fifth Element*, *Children of Men*, and *Serenity*. In *Serenity*, Mal – though sympathetic to River – uses her to exact personal revenge on the government, which becomes the main theme of the film. In *Minority Report*, Tom Cruise's character, John Anderton, is not principally concerned with Agatha's suffering or the fact she has no rights (at least not until the closing of the film when his own safety is secure). His goal is to use her to establish his innocence and preserve his personal freedom. For Theo in *Children of Men*, the narrative of the film suggests that he associates Kee's unborn baby with his dead son. The salvation of Kee and her child brings about inner peace and restoration from his own past suffering.

The actions guardians take require them to use the Christ-figure as a tool to accomplish their aims. This action does not appear to be the mode Williams identifies in her theory. The fact Williams focuses heavily on sympathy-inspired political action makes her theory more difficult to apply to films less concerned with revealing and inspiring action to counter political injustice. Gender, class and racial inequalities are primary themes in melodrama. *Philadelphia* (1993) and *Erin Brockovich* (2000) are examples of two melodramas that successfully showcase Williams' theory of suffering leading to empowerment, largely because of the political message that drives both narratives and the suffering which inspires action among the audience as well as the victim-heroes in the films. In *Philadelphia*, Tom Hanks' character, Andrew Beckett, is an AIDS victim terminated from his job at a law firm who suffers as he wastes away from his disease. This suffering gives moral authority for him to take action, which he does

[10] As will be discussed in the following section, when female Christ-figures take action upon themselves, it is usually an ambiguous self-sacrifice that does not prove particularly empowering.

through a lawsuit allowing him to argue for the rights and benefits denied to him. The sympathetic audience is compelled to agree that he should receive these benefits, since his suffering has demonstrated his virtue and worthiness of equality under the law. This is also the case for Erin Brockovich. In the film, Brockovich suffers on two fronts: she is a poor, single mother struggling to make ends meet. In addition, she suffers on behalf of victims sick from diseases contracted from a corporation's illegal dumping practices. As a sufferer, Brockovich is able to sympathize with others who suffer, allowing her to take action on their behalf as well as her own. While melodramas such as *Philadelphia* and *Erin Brochovich* reveal those who would otherwise be invisible and ask audiences to pay attention to their suffering, female Christ-figures are already visible – and purified – meaning their suffering serves a different purpose from the one Williams identifies in her theory.

In *Whale Rider*, we have an example of a female Christ-figure, outside the science fiction genre, whose suffering does support Williams' theory, primarily because there is a clear political message, and the Christ-figure suffers and acts on her own behalf, revealing her moral legitimacy to the audience and characters in the film. Pai believes she is the chosen one to lead her people, but it is not until she nearly drowns and falls into a coma that her grandfather and village recognize her as their rightful leader. Therefore, her suffering indicates her worthiness to lead. In the film, we see the manifestation of a clear political argument when we apply Williams' premise: Pai has suffered, proving herself worthy and, therefore, deserves political inclusion and the right to participate and be a leader, no matter her gender. *Whale Rider* demonstrates that politically driven films which borrow from melodrama can incorporate a progressive female Christ-figure. But in science fiction, the action inspired by these women is often self-motivated on the part of the male guardians.

Furthermore, the manner in which female Christ-figures in the genre are used as tools for salvation by those who take action only further devalues their suffering.

For the female Christ-figure in science fiction, suffering displays her lack of agency and creates a unique form of suffering not experienced by male Christ-figures in the genre. When female Christ-figures – specifically those in science fiction – suffer, it is because they have no choice. Male Christ-figures suffer willingly and sacrifice themselves freely in order to save humanity. That is to say that the female Christ-figure's suffering is not necessarily a method for salvation; instead, it is a manifestation of her lack of agency. As suffering indicates virtue, so it also denotes the lack of control women have over their own bodies and messianic destinies. In this way, one wonders if Williams' formula works to bolster regressive gender norms and the idea that submission is a virtue.

Suffering is not foreign to the Christ-figure in any genre. The passion of Christ glorifies and emphasizes his physical suffering and humiliation that led to the salvation of humanity. Therefore, the suffering of the body is a common theme. But while Christ suffered physical pain, he was still in control of his actions and his decision to embrace his role. Therefore, male saviors do not suffer out of lack of choice or control, as do their female counterparts. Male messiahs fall under Kozlovic's explanation of a Christ figure in their almost enthusiastic willingness to suffer and die for their cause (para 51). We see this pattern in many male Christ-figures such as Neo. Neo never suffers in the way Leeloo or River do. While their suffering is a result of frustration and the lack of control they have over themselves and their bodies, male Christ-figures suffer out of choice, which brings them a kind of pleasure and fulfilment. For Neo, a majority of his suffering is a result of physical pain, not the emotional pain we see experienced by female Christ figures in the science fiction genre.

In many of the films mentioned here, the female Christ-figure is overwhelmed by her emotions, which causes her suffering. Leeloo often has tears in her eyes because she is emotionally besieged, in part because she is struck by the sins she witnesses among humanity. In the beginning of the film, she reviews humanity's entire history, its wars and suffering. This causes her significant grief and distress, as she has trouble reconciling man's sinful nature with her own purity. Her sorrow aligns Leeloo with the person of Christ. Leeloo also suffers in a manner particular to female Christ-figures in that she has little control over her body and movements. On more than one occasion, Leeloo finds herself trapped and held captive, in one instance falling from a window and crashing through the roof of Corbin Dallas' cab. Unable to speak but a few words of English and cornered by the government authorities from which she has just escaped, all of whom are male, Leeloo begins to cry and desperately begs Corbin to "please help."

Leeloo's fragile state limits her physical freedom and requires her to be carried from one venue to another, and she rarely protests as her male guardians lead her about. The men's ability to control Leeloo is aided by the fact that she is unable to speak English for nearly half of the film. Though a "supreme being" and repeatedly referred to as "perfect," Leeloo has no voice or means to express herself, causing her an immense degree of frustration.

River suffers due to lack of agency as well, not only the lack of control over her body, but also over her mind. We learn in the *Firefly* series, and again in the film, that River won a position at a prestigious Alliance school for her aptitude in academics and athletics.[11] Cryptic letters River sent to her brother, however, led him to believe that she was being held against her will, and he gave up his promising medical career and fortune to rescue her. In reality, River was not sent to a school, but taken by the Alliance and

[11] The Alliance is the corrupt government in *Serenity* and *Firefly*.

forced to undergo experimentation in an attempt to weaponize her. The procedures they did both to her mind and body turned River into a deadly weapon, as we see in her few fighting scenes, but these invasive experiments also left her insane. She has telepathic powers, but cannot control what she "sees" or block out the memories of others, which are graphic in nature and cause her an inordinate amount of suffering. In the *Firefly* series, Simon, her brother, explains how the experiments done to River destroyed her emotional and mental state because scientists damaged part of her brain. In the episode "Ariel," he says to Jayne, "You know how you get scared, or worried, or nervous. But you don't want to be scared or worried or nervous, so you push it to the back of your mind. You try not to think about it. Your amygdale is what lets you do that – it's like a filter in your brain that keeps your feelings in check. She feels everything. She can't not" ("Ariel"). River's ability to control her own thoughts has been stripped away from her. She must be controlled by others because she cannot control herself. As a result of these events, River is unpredictable, and her strange behavior and erratic emotional changes are as startling to her as they are to her companions. Unregulated thoughts and memories cause River indescribable pain and make it almost impossible for her to communicate clearly as she struggles to put into words and logical order what she sees in her mind's eye. The mental and physical experimentations done to her – this attempt of the male-dominated state to gain control over her body – strips this Christ-figure of her agency.[12]

The Gaze

[12] Agatha, the precog in *Minority Report,* also suffers in this way. She is a tool used by the government to predict crime. Not only is her mind controlled and used by the government to "save humanity from sin," but her body is locked away and secured as well. Throughout the film, she has no control over her body as she exists suspended in a fluid, pool-like structure. She and her two brothers live in what society has termed "the temple" where they are cared for by a male caretaker. The memories and sins she must relive from humanity's evils cause her great suffering throughout the film.

Why female Christ-figures in science fiction film are disempowered and objectified in such a blatant way is up for debate. But the manner in which the female body is treated might begin to explain the problem. For the female Christ-figure, their lack of choice and agency is also connected with their lack of control over their own bodies. They are rendered ineffectual due to the importance placed on their physical bodies because, for the female savior, it is not her choices or actions which save humanity, but an involuntary function of her body.

As an instrument to be manipulated, the female Christ-figures' role focuses on the mystique of the female form, which ultimately disempowers them, leaving these women vulnerable to the control of others. The emphasis on the female body illustrates Laura Mulvey's concept of "the male gaze." In her seminal work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey incorporates psychoanalysis, maintaining that films have the power to reveal society's political subconscious. She further argues that women are frequently the "bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning" (4), which is true of the films discussed here. Mulvey explains how the "male gaze" empowers men to control the storyline and plot of the film, leaving women to be little more than sexual playthings – desired and managed by male protagonists in the story – and sexual objects that deliver visual pleasure to those watching the film. Consequently, male characters are active in their roles while women are passive as they become dependent on the actions and desires of their male leads. Women, relegated to the role of sexual object, empower the male characters by drawing attention to their virility, masculinity and strength.

Female Christ-figures, particularly in the science fiction film genre, are disempowered by this male gaze and are frequently controlled by a male guardian or caretaker representing the dominant patriarchy. Even when female Christ-figures are considered the "lead" in a film, it is often their male guardians who drive the storyline

while enacting their gaze, which has a hand in disrobing the Christ-figure of her agency and authority. Ott and Aoki incorporate Mulvey's work in their study of *The Fifth Element*. They note that *The Fifth Element* "strips its female characters of any human agency through a process Freud termed scopophilia, that is, by making them objects of a 'controlling and curious gaze'" (155). When women messiahs are sexualized by this gaze, they lose their agency.

It is no coincidence that the first time the audience meets Leeloo she is naked and trapped inside a glass chamber surrounded by male scientists; she is sexualized and disempowered by the "male gaze" from the very moment she appears on screen. Leeloo frantically examines her prison, obviously disoriented and seeking a means of escape. Later in this scene, her body remains the camera's focus, and though she is no longer completely nude, thanks to a few strategically placed strips of cloth that have been provided for her, Leeloo's body still remains the primary spectacle. It is also worth noting that in the beginning of the film, before the viewer has seen Leeloo, we witness her ship's destruction while on its way to earth. Hope, however, is not lost since this same group of government scientists is able to reconstruct her body from one remaining cell. This indicates that Leeloo is a thing to be constructed and controlled by men.

Throughout this scene in the science lab, the male scientists openly ogle Leeloo's body and comment on her perfection.[13] To provoke laughter from the viewer, one government official says, "I'd like to take a few pictures…for the archives." The film, therefore, readily acknowledges and makes light of the male preoccupation with Leeloo's body, and the viewer quickly gathers that Leeloo's physical form will be a main focus throughout the remainder of the film. Essentially, Leeloo's body is a vessel to be watched and guarded. Not only will her body save humanity because it is literally the missing

[13] This theme of perfection, which is constantly emphasized in the film, is an ontological maker that further identifies Leeloo as a Christ-figure.

"fifth element" and necessary for the survival of man, but it is also demystified, objectified and controlled by the male gaze, becoming a thing of both pleasure and salvation for the male-dominated state.

The Fifth Element is a clear example of how Mulvey's gaze both sexualizes and disempowers the object of that gaze, in this case, Leeloo. The gaze strips Leeloo of her power, leaving her to be controlled by the men around her. The result is that her actions are not aligned with her willful choice to save, but with the involuntary function of her body, a body that is merely a tool for the patriarchy. She becomes a striking example of how the emphasis placed on the female form weakens the Christ-figure's agency, as she cannot even claim control over her own body much less her messianic mission.

The roadmap to restoring order and saving humanity, according to the logic of *The Fifth Element,* requires male love and the formation of the heterosexual couple, which is made possible, in part, through the disempowering force of the male gaze. By the last scene of the film, when Leeloo must undertake her role as messiah, she can only accomplish her objective when, rather paradoxically, she is emotionally too weak to do so. While she is the fifth element and her physical body the key to humanity's salvation, it is her male hero and guardian, Dallas Corbin, who must physically carry her to the temple to save the world because Leeloo is too emotionally distressed to continue. [14]

In this scene near the end of the film, Leeloo hangs like a limp ragdoll in Corbin's arms. As Leeloo sobs, Corbin repeatedly and desperately pleads with her to perform her role and save the world from destruction. During his pleas, she counters by begging him

[14] In the science fiction film *Babylon A.D.* (2008), the female savior Aurora also has a male guardian and caretaker, Toorop, played by Vin Diesel. Again, this theme of the male guardian transporting the female messiah figure from one place to another is evident. Aurora is literally described as "a package" to be delivered at a certain place and time. Furthermore, the platonic caregiver relationship between Toorop and Aurora changes into a more sexual connection by the end of the film.

to profess his love for her. It is not until Corbin admits his love and the two kiss that Leeloo can release her body and save the world.

In the film, this "release" is visually manifested as a mystical and powerful force of light that expels itself from Leeloo's body and destroys the alien intruders orbiting earth's space. An overhead wide-angled shot of this scene centers Leeloo and Corbin in the middle of the frame; from this vantage point, Leeloo appears as though she is being crucified. The other four elements representing wind, fire, water and earth are all outside the shot, but their energy is visible in the corresponding colored lights that converge on Leeloo to form the shape of a cross. As the camera gazes down upon her, Leeloo – true to form – appears utterly overwhelmed by the energy beam exorcising itself from her body. It overtakes her. The shafts of light push Leeloo's arms out to each side, causing her body to form a recognizable crucifixion pose as though she is nailed to a cross of light. Corbin is all the while physically supporting Leeloo in her proper place.

Not only must Leeloo be physically carried to this particular spot, but she must also be emotionally supported by Corbin, her guardian. Most importantly, it is very difficult for the viewer to determine if this release is an intentional one on Leeloo's part or simply an involuntary bodily reaction to the love she has now won from the male love interest. Before this ambiguous moment, she and Corbin are locked in a passionate kiss, seemingly lost in the moment. From the expression that spreads across her face, it appears as though she is taken by surprise as the light beam comes out of her body. This uncertain moment leaves the conscientious viewer wondering if it was triggered by an eleventh-hour "I love you" or is an intentional action on the part of the female Christ-figure. To phrase it another way: was it Leeloo's willful choice to save humanity or merely a knee-jerk reaction and uncontrollable bodily response? If her previous behavior and lack of

agency throughout the film is any indicator, one is more than tempted to conclude that this final action was reflexive.

Children of Men also showcases a female savior who exhibits some Christic qualities, and much like *The Fifth Element*, her role is aligned with the inherent function of her physical body.[15] Set in a dystopian not-too-distant future, *Children of Men* is a science-fiction film with a heavy focus on realism and imagines a world where humans no longer have the ability to procreate. This not only dooms the human race to extinction, but also creates a desperate social environment which threatens to collapse at any moment. Humanity seems to be fast approaching its demise; however, hope is finally realized when a black woman named Kee is discovered to be pregnant. The film leads the viewer to believe that if Kee and her unborn baby reach a group of scientist who call themselves the Human Project, humanity can be saved.

While the savior in this movie differs from Leeloo in that Kee is not an action star but a pregnant human woman, the implication in both films is that the involuntary function of the female body, not the woman's intellect or agency, will save humanity. In *Children of Men*, Kee's maternal body makes her a potential savior since she is the only woman who can reproduce and reveal to scientists the answer to humanity's reproduction dilemma. Though she is not sexualized in the same manner as Leeloo, her body becomes a maternal spectacle that falls under the control of the male gaze and male-dominated state.

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[15]While most of the films here focus on Christ-figures, there are cases when female protagonists may be more accurately defined as a savior figure. Female saviors exhibit many Christic qualities, though not enough to definitively identify them as a Christ-figure. Like female Christ-figures, female saviors are objectified and sexualized by the male gaze and seen by men as tools to save humanity. The way female saviors are portrayed in SF film, often through mysticism, special powers and an emphasis on their otherworldly perfection, identifies them as something more significant than mere heroines. Therefore, a savior falls between the functions of the Christ-figure and heroine. In order to be coded as a savior and not merely a heroine, saviors save entire races from annihilation or in some way prevent an apocalypse. This qualification differentiates the savior character from the hero-heroine whose feats of heroism are localized to a smaller community.

Like Leeloo, Kee has little agency as she neither by choice nor intention becomes pregnant. Furthermore, she is constantly led throughout the film by her primary male guardian, Theo, played by Clive Owen. Reminiscent of Leeloo and River, Kee must have a male guardian to protect and guide her and ensure she makes it to her final destination. It is also worth noting that although Kee begins her journey with two other female guardians, both are killed by the film's end, leaving only Theo as the decision maker.

Early in the film, Kee is given the opportunity to exercise a small degree of agency over her future, but quickly learns her lesson. She is offered the option to stay at a farm house or leave and try to make it to a harbor where it is believed the Human Project will be waiting for her. She makes the decision to stay, but shortly afterwards, Theo sneaks into Kee's room and informs her that they must leave because she is in danger. The implication here is that Kee does not know what is best for her own wellbeing or her baby and must rely on Theo's judgment. From this point on, Theo continues to make all of the major decisions on behalf of Kee and her unborn child.

These films demonstrate that it is not the female Christ-figure's function to make decisions or exercise agency. It is her body that saves and that body falls under the jurisdiction and control of men. Furthermore, the female body propagates the male-dominated state, either through reproduction, as in *Children of Men*, or sexual pleasure and submission, as in *The Fifth Element*.

The passivity that results from the gaze is further reinforced by the extensive surveillance female Christ-figures are constantly under. We see the effects of surveillance to an extent in *The Fifth Element* as Leeloo's male guardians feel they must constantly keep her safe and protected. In reality, this protection is for their benefit, as they will eventually use Leeloo's body to save the world and preserve the state. This matter of surveillance is especially evident in *Serenity*. River has many watchers, including Simon,

her brother, as her primary guardian. Simon is constantly watching River, and when River is not in his presence, he is looking for her. He is not alone. When River is not being watched, there tend to be consequences, as she is prone to finding or causing mischief. Therefore, the entire crew aboard Serenity, the ship in which River and Simon have booked passage, has an invested interest in keeping tabs on River, for her protection as well as their own. Even those outside the ship surveil River. Throughout the film, the Alliance attempts to locate and regain control of River, often through the use of computers, cameras and satellites. [16]

This "corporate watching" is present in *Resident Evil: Extinction* as well. Alice, the female protagonist, is on the run from the Umbrella Corporation, who will stop at nothing to locate her. They use a whole fleet of satellites and cameras to find and monitor her. As a result, Alice spends the entire film desperately trying to avoid their surveillance. This watching, and Alice's desire to keep free from it, influences her movements throughout the film. She cannot interact publically for fear of being seen, and she is even forced to break away from friends in order to "stay off the grid." The movie becomes less about how Alice will save the world and more about her attempt to regain control and agency over her body.[17]

As is evident, female Christ-figures are under the close watch of men, whether benign self-elected guardians or troublesome enemies wishing them ill. In either case, both groups fall under the repressive, male-dominated state. Because of surveillance and the sexualized male gaze, these female Christ-figures are controlled by the male establishment, meaning they lose authority over their movements and over the rights and

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[16] Surveillance in *Serenity* also includes monitoring River's physical condition. Her brother is diligent in monitoring her mental and physical health, and he is not the only one. In one of the first scenes in the film, River is strapped into a medical chair undergoing scientific tests, monitored by Alliance scientists.

[17] Regarding the sexualized gaze, it is interesting to note that Alice, unlike her depiction in the previous *Resident Evil* films, primarily wears bulkier clothes that almost fully cover and hide her body.

use of their bodies. This affects the choices they would otherwise make and is problematic for a Christ-figure who is often so preoccupied with male "watchfulness" that she has little time to truly exercise control and power over anything at all.

But what of the male saviors who represent this patriarchy? How do their role, their body and their performance as Christ-figure differ from their female counterparts? For starters, while male messiahs might be accompanied on their journey by a female hero or love interest, male Christ-figures are still members of the dominant male establishment, meaning the gaze of the female is unlikely to undercut control over their agency to perform their role as savior.

That is not to say there is no emphasis placed on the body of the male Christ-figure. However, because most of these Christ-figures interact within the confines of a patriarchal system and in films which showcase only a handful of women, the female gaze is ultimately rendered ineffectual. At best, the female gaze may actually validate male characters, attributing to them a masculinity which implies that they are up to the task of saving the world. While the male Christ-figure's body may assist in their role, it does not strip them of their agency or ability to control their body. The body then becomes just another tool they wield, a tool among many that they utilize in order to save humanity. This is in striking contrast to female Christ-figures in science fiction who are themselves tools to be used and controlled by men.

Agency in *Serenity:* Who Controls River?

The opening shot in *Serenity* reveals Earth hanging silently in space. The planet appears old and worn, earth's clouds and oceans colored in a brownish tinge indicating heavy pollution. As the camera focuses on the planet, ships are seen leaving the atmosphere. The narrator explains that "Earth that was could no longer sustain our numbers. We were so many. We found a new solar system, dozens of planets and

hundreds of moons, each one terraformed, a process taking decades, to support human life, to be new earths" (*Serenity*). This introduction of terraforming -- of man playing God, altering nature and controlling it as a tool – becomes the primary plotline in the film. *Serenity* warns of the danger in attempting to control nature, a theme further developed in the portrayal of River.

River's relationship with nature links her to innocence and purity, further strengthening her role as the film's Christ-figure – the one whose innocence will redeem what man has polluted. Much in the way Christians believe Christ came to restore truth and the natural order, River will do the same. Her role as Christ-figure arises from man's sinfulness in attempting to play God, in his belief that he can create worlds and "make people better" (*Serenity*). This effort to create and improve nature brings about a dark reality in the film; viewers learn that the Reavers are products of the Alliance's experiments in human conditioning and that River's schizophrenic mental state is also a result of the government meddling with human nature. [18] River is an example of Kozlovic's redeemer Christ-figure as she is comes "from a context of evil or strife to take on the sinfulness of those around them" (Kozlovic para 28). In other words, River is a Christ-figure produced from the Alliance's sins against nature. Whether meddling with the temperament of a population or altering an entire ecosystem, the film repeatedly calls attention to how nature is polluted and corrupted by those who seek to control it, just as River is nearly destroyed by the Alliance's attempts to control and alter her. Therefore, River represents the dangers and consequences that result when man tampers with God's natural design, a theme made evident in the way she is directly tied with nature (even her name makes reference to it). According to one scientist experimenting on River, she is a

[18] Reavers are a small segment from the population on Miranda, an outlying planet that the Alliance terraformed. During the process, the government released a chemical known as the Pax into the environment to weed out aggression in the settlers. Those who came to be known as Reavers responded to the Pax by becoming exponentially more aggressive and are now more monster than human.

"creature of extraordinary grace," the term "creature" signifying that River is either something more or less than human.[19]

River's connection to nature is visually evident in the manifestation of her special powers as well as her physical movements and attire, which frequently sexualizes and objectifies her. Due to Alliance experiments, River posses an impressive range of psychic abilities. Her psychic powers often suggest to others in the film and *Firefly* series that she is mystically in tune with her environment, that "she's a reader" and "sees into the truth of things" (*Serenity*). Her wardrobe reflects this connection to nature as well, especially compared to her female counterparts. While many of the women dress in clothing inspired by the western genre – brown pants, heavy jackets, high boots, gun holsters – River's apparel appears more organic. She wears billowy skirts and summer dresses with low necklines and is at times barefoot in the film, something that becomes the camera's focus in multiple scenes. For example, in one of the first scenes when River is on Serenity, the crew prepares to offload onto a planet to perform a heist. While Mal, the captain, is making final preparations, we see in the background River's bare leg and foot slink out from behind a mountain of silver crates as she slithers her way to ground level. She is wearing an airy knee-length dress, and the manner in which River moves is seductive and animal-like, a striking contrast to the sterile, bulky ship and futuristic technology surrounding her. Her bare skin and slow movements draw attention to her body as spectacle, in a way equating the feminine with something primal. Though River is not sexualized to the degree of Leeloo in *The Fifth Element* (River has no love interest

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[19] In an additional link to nature, River is referenced as an Albatross, a bird signifying good luck in the poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the poem, when this creature, representative of nature, is killed, bad luck befalls the sailors who have caused it harm. When the Operative in *Serenity* calls River an Albatross, Mal points out that an "Albatross was a ship's good luck till some idiot killed it." As in the poem, the harm done to River will ultimately bring about devastation to those who have caused her, and other innocents, suffering.

and her main guardian is her brother), there are still many instances when River's body is sexualized for the camera, disempowering and objectifying her.

In the following scene, which finds the crew on the planet performing the heist, the camera once again focuses on River's bare feet and sensual movements. She has been ordered to accompany the robbers to the planet, so they can use her psychic powers. The camera tightens in on her naked feet as she prowls around the room, reading the thoughts of the townspeople who are lying face down on the ground. In this scene, she is both sexualized and objectified while under the control of a dominant male figure who is using her as a tool for his purpose.

Much of *Serenity* focuses on the question of who controls River, even as River struggles to situate herself in reality and reclaim mastery of her own mind and body. In an opening scene, before River finds her home on Serenity, the film introduces a pre-teen River attending an Alliance school. This is the first instance when the viewer observes River, and here she sits outside in nature, amidst green trees and bushes. Dressed in white and in the back of an open-tented classroom, River listens as her instructor explains the history of the Alliance – their terraforming missions and how their control over the solar system has established an era of peace. As the scene develops, River questions the right of the Alliance to "meddle" in the lives of others, showcasing her desire to fight against the control the Alliance espouses. But her question is met by violence and constraint. As River questions the right of government to meddle, her instructor takes River's pen and stabs her in the forehead. The scene then cuts to a lab where a scientist has taken a needle and pierced River in the same area. Now the viewer learns that River is not a child in school, but a young woman hallucinating in an Alliance lab. As River dreams, she is

undergoing intrusive government experimentations against her will.[20] The camera shows River in her dream state, her body strapped to a medical chair, wires and medical monitoring devices wrapped around her, and on her head, a medical contraption resembling a futuristic crown of thorns. She thrashes about violently, groaning in misery as her hallucination takes this violent turn. As the scene suggests, River lacks control of both body and mind, and her inner world and outer reality constantly overlap, adding to her confusion and suffering throughout the film.

While River's brother, Simon, ultimately rescues her from the Alliance, life on Serenity does not lead to River's independence. Though physically free from the Alliance, their experiments have left River unable to control her thoughts and actions. Furthermore, her entire existence is spent attempting to remain free from the watchful eye of a government that doggedly hunts her. Even beyond the control of the Alliance, a power struggle over who controls River continues among the males onboard Serenity, the primary dispute being between Simon and Mal, but occasionally Jayne as well. While Simon ultimately proves to be her primary guardian, as River makes clear in the scene where Simon is almost killed, Mal frequently exerts control over River and uses her powers for his own purpose, as well intended and harmless as they may be. This is evident before the raiding party leaves for the planet in the beginning of the film. Prior to the heist, Mal and Simon have a heated argument as to whether River will join the group. Simon insists she will not, but Mal exercises his authority as captain and wins out. (Throughout this debate, no one asks River if she wishes to go.) [21] While on the planet and in Simon's absence, Mal acts as River's guardian. When the Reavers land, he takes

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[20] Many of the female Christ-figures discussed here are held captive in labs including Leeloo in *The Fifth Element*, Agatha in *Minority Report* and Alice in *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*.

[21] Mal makes clear in this dialogue that her abilities might be, as he phrases it, "of use to me," leading Simon to retort, "That's your guiding star, isn't it…what's of use." Mal, though his intentions are often benign, will use River when it suits him.

We see multiple examples of others controlling River in this scene. Not only is River manipulated by the Alliance signal, but a simple code word from her brother, a word subconsciously implanted by the Alliance a year or more before, renders her powerless. Furthermore, after Simon incapacitates River, Mal physically scoops her up in his arms and takes her back to the ship, again raising the question of control between male guardians. This scene also showcases River's body in a more visually stimulating and sexual way. While River enters the bar wearing a dress, it is covered by a long Chinese-styled robe. Upon falling under the trance, she turns away from the bar's television, and the camera focuses on her back as she slowly takes off her robe and lets it fall to the floor. This undressing displays a more revealing outfit as River proceeds to fight. More like a dance than a brawl, her movements showcase the lines of her body while elegant high kicks reveal her entire leg and thigh. Here, violence is paired with sexuality, and male onlookers watch as she performs for them, all while she is unconscious, which makes the act more disempowering. These male spectators not only include those in the bar, but the hidden cameras set up by the Alliance who, in a manner of speaking, prearranged this performance through the use of their hidden signal.

In *Serenity*, River shows evidence of struggling to regain control over her own mind and body, making her in some ways a more progressive character than Leeloo. Her desire to reveal the truth about Miranda eventually leads to the minor restoration of her sanity by the film's conclusion. But the common theme of River's suffering and lack of control for a majority of the film calls into question the manner in which female Christ-figures are portrayed in science fiction cinema and, in some cases, the ultimate power of their sacrifice.

The Ambiguous Sacrifice

The notion of self-sacrifice is somewhat muddled in the case of River and similar to Leeloo's behavior in *The Fifth Element*. Leeloo's lack of agency and her reliance on her male guardian to perform her final messianic act lead one to believe that her sacrifice is diminished. She does not show the eagerness of Pai to save her community, nor does Leeloo appear to have Neo's zeal facing death while combating the Smith program. This passivity again indicates the regressive nature of Leeloo's role as Christ-figure; at best, this moment of sacrifice is ambiguous. At worst, it is an involuntary reaction of the body, a tool of the patriarchy. Neither option is overwhelmingly inspiring.

River's climactic moment of self-sacrifice towards the end of the film, while perhaps more active than Leeloo's, still retains some of this same ambiguity. During the scene in question, River and her crew are surrounded by a group of Reavers, and during the battle, River's brother and guardian, Simon, is shot by a laser blast. After Simon's potentially fatal injury, it is discovered that the medical kit that can save his life is in the cargo area where the Reavers have a stronghold. Simon, with blood spilling from his belly, tells River, "I'm sorry," and mutters, "I hate to leave." This last statement throws River into desperation. In a telling moment, River responds to Simon by saying, "You won't. You take care of me, Simon. You've always taken care of me." The thought of losing her guardian finally causes River to spring into action. The fear of loss is what motivates her to potentially sacrifice herself – not the loss of her community of friends, who will surely die if a miracle fails to present itself – but the loss of Simon, whom River identifies as her primary guardian. It appears that without Simon's impending death, the rest of the crew would have died. Apparently, their fate is not enough motivation for River to come to the rescue. Similar to the way Leeloo depends on Corbin's love as motivation to save the world, so River's desire not to lose Simon propels her to perform.

In both films, these two "sacrificial" acts appear to be a far cry from the more overt displays of sacrifice exhibited by other Christ-figures.

The Evolution of a Higher Power?

Though the *Resident Evil* series is more readily aligned with the horror and action genre, it includes many science fiction elements as well. Milla Jovavich reprises her role as a savior figure, and again it is her body which can save humanity, this time from the T-virus which has turned men and women into flesh-eating zombies. *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007), the third in the series, provides a mixture of progressive and regressive characteristics in the female Christ-figure, perhaps due to the fusion of elements from the science fiction, action, video game and horror genres.

Milla Jovavich's character, Alice, is similar to Leeloo due to the emphasis placed on the involuntary actions of the female body. In the second film in the series, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), we learn that Alice's genetic structure has been altered by the Umbrella Corporation, a morally reprehensible research group responsible for the development and spread of the T-virus. It is also revealed that the Umbrella Corporation has altered Alice's genetic makeup to bind her cells with the T-virus, turning her into a superior mutated being. This is all done without Alice's consent. In the following film, *Resident Evil: Extinction*, we subsequently discover that the salvation of humanity lies – where else? – but in Alice's body.

By the end of *Apocalypse*, Alice's role as Christ-figure is established in her literal death and resurrection, and, as to be expected, this female Christ-figure also falls under the male gaze. Once resurrected, we learn that Alice has transformed into a super being possessing psychic and physical powers that continue to grow at an exponential rate. Like other female Christ-figures considered here, Alice's power, and the desire of the patriarchy to control it, makes her vulnerable. In the scene in *Apocalypse* in which Alice

is brought back to life, the familiar formula of perfect being disempowered by the male gaze is established. The camera focuses on Alice's naked body, which is wired to medical devises while suspended in a water-filled glass chamber. Just like Leeloo in *The Fifth Element*, River in *Serenity* and Agatha in *Minority Report*, Alice is in a lab and under the male gaze. This scene showcases, once again, a female Christ-figure controlled by a repressive, male-dominated state, a theme further developed in *Extinction.* In the closing scene of *Apocalypse,* the viewer learns that Alice has been programmed by the Umbrella Corporation, much like River in *Serenity.*[22]

For most of *Extinction*, Alice's actions are governed by the actions of others or by her own inability to control her increasingly powerful body. With her newly developed telekinetic abilities, she accidentally destroys her only mode of transportation, a motorcycle, which limits her mobility. In many scenes, she is on the run from humans infected by the T-virus or agents of the Umbrella Corporation. Alice is constantly attempting to escape the watchful eye of the Umbrella Corporation who are desperate to capture and use her body.

Nonetheless, Alice's role as potential messiah proves more progressive than Leeloo and River's for a number of reasons. First, in *Extinction*, there is no clear male guardian protecting Alice or making decisions on her behalf. She often chooses to be a loner and is consciously attempting to escape the controlling gaze of the patriarchy, represented by the Umbrella Corporation and their extensive network of cameras and satellites. Her lack of male companionship further limits the gaze throughout the film. In fact, while an emphasis is placed on Alice's body as a saving object, and though she is awarded a great number of action sequences, her body is generally heavily covered with

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[22] Also similar to *Serenity*, man's sinfulness results in the death of nature. The T-Virus not only destroys human life, but Alice tells us in the opening narrative of *Extinction* that the T-Virus dried up lakes and killed plant life, leaving earth a wasteland.

bulky clothing throughout the film, causing the viewers to appreciate her combat abilities instead of her sexuality.

If we boil down the plot of the film, it is about the struggle of Alice to claim control over her body. In other words, *Extinction* follows a female Christ-figure where the majority of the film is not about her saving the world so much as it is about her attempting to gain rights over her own body. The very nature of the film, though more progressive than others, showcases the struggle to overcome the conventions binding many female saviors and Christ-figures within the science fiction genre. For this reason, *Extinction* appears to be a step in the evolutionary process of female messianic cinema as it works to take steps towards something more progressive.

Many of the science-fiction films discussed here that incorporate a female Christ-figure demonstrate a surprising tendency to marginalize women and reinforce traditional gender norms. Because of the emphasis placed on the Christ-figures body as a tool for salvation, instead of her intellect, female messiahs in the genre often struggle to exercise agency and are left to unduly suffer. But as *Resident Evil*, and even moments within *Serenity*, begin to suggest, more recent films within this niche appear to be slowly moving towards more progressive depictions of female Christ-figures. By simply highlighting the struggle of these Christ-figures in attempting to reclaim rights over their own bodies and destinies, these films emphasize the need to resolve this lingering tension, which may eventually lead to films depicting female Christ-figures who truly embody and fulfill their role as Messiah.

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Appendix:

Narrative Conventions in Films with a Female Christ-Figure

There are commonalities in the manner in which female Christ-figures and saviors in science fiction are portrayed that appear unique within science-fiction messianic films. While these conventions may not hold true for all films incorporating a female Christ-figure in the genre, below are some general conventions manifested in many of the films discussed in this paper:

1. *The female Christ-figure is disempowered by the male gaze.* This gaze sexualizes the Christ-figure and strips her of agency.
2. *The Christ-figure's elevation as a "perfect" or "special" entity also leads to her devaluation as a thinking person, resulting in her objectification.* Female Christ-figures are often elevated because of their righteousness and special abilities, which are linked to saving humanity. But the importance placed on their bodies' ability to save means their bodies are valued more than their persons. In this way, female Christ-figures do not save by choice, but by the inherent function of their body, which the patriarchy deems too important to be left in the hands of women.
3. *The female Christ-figure has a primary male guardian who controls her movements.* This guardian manages her actions under the guise of protection. In many cases, this translates into tight control of the Christ-figure's physical movements as the male guardian will literally transport her from one place to another, from one scene to the next. (The guardian may take her by the hand or physically carry her.) In this way, the Christ-figure is handled like a piece of precious cargo, even when she is introduced as an "all powerful" being with special abilities. In addition, the male guardian is typically the one to take action in the film. We see Christ-figures and saviors controlled by a primary male

guardian in *The Fifth Element*, *Serenity*, *Minority Report*, *Babylon A.D.* and *Children of Men.*

4. *There are often multiple male guardians fighting for control of the Christ-figure.* In the place of disciples, the female Christ-figure may have a host of self-proclaimed guardians, often male, who are "devoted" to her protection, and by derivation, to their control of her, which ultimately objectifies the Christ-figure. This leads to conflict among the guardians as to who will serve as the Christ-figure's primary caretaker. Infighting is evident in *The Fifth Element*, *Serenity*, *Minority Report* and to a certain extent, *Children of Men* and *Babylon A.D.* In these last two films, the secondary caregivers are female, who all die by the end of the film, securing the role of the male guardian as primary caregiver.
5. *The female Christ-figure struggles to find her voice.* This may be taken literally, meaning the Christ-figure or savior is physically silenced and unable to express herself and give voice to her thoughts. This theme is very pronounced in *The Fifth Element*, *Serenity* and *Minority Report.*
6. *In relation to the above convention, the female Christ figure's suffering is born primarily out of frustration and lack of choice.* While male Christ-figures willingly and enthusiastically suffer for their elected cause, the female Christ-figure suffers because of her lack of agency.
7. *The Christ-figure's final saving act requires male love or preservation of the primary guardian.* Willing self-sacrifice is at times ambiguous as the Christ-figure is propelled to act, not to save humanity, but to preserve or restore her relationship with the primary guardian. This is true in *The Fifth Element* and *Serenity*.
8. *Female Christ-figures are either constructed or held in a lab, representative of the patriarchy's attempt to control nature.* Christ-figures are often created from man's sinfulness in attempting to play God and control nature, including human nature.

Examples include *The Fifth Element*, *Serenity*, *Minority Report* and the *Resident Evil* series. Though viewers do not see it on screen, we understand Aurora in *Babylon A.D.* to have been constructed in a lab.[23]

[23] At the end of *Children of Men*, Kee reaches the Human Project, implying that she will be taken by scientists who will experiment and determine how they can use her body to save humanity. In this case, science and the lab are places of restoration and hope, but it still implies that man will attempt to control nature.

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